

Cultural Diplomacy: Harnessing Nollywood for Nigeria's Global Influence

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diplomacy has become an increasingly significant instrument in contemporary international relations, enabling states to project influence, shape global perceptions, and foster international cooperation through cultural attraction rather than coercive power. Within this context, Nigeria's film industry popularly known as Nollywood has emerged as one of the most influential cultural industries in the Global South and a key contributor to Nigeria's growing soft power presence. This study examines the role of Nollywood as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy in enhancing Nigeria's global influence, improving its international image, and facilitating cross-cultural engagement. Drawing on multidisciplinary literature from international relations, media studies, cultural policy, and creative economy scholarship, the paper analyzes Nollywood's historical evolution, industrial structure, global circulation, and economic significance within Nigeria's creative sector. The study demonstrates that since its emergence in the early 1990s as a low-budget direct-to-video film movement, Nollywood has evolved into one of the world's most prolific film industries, reaching audiences across Africa, Europe, North America, and the global African diaspora. Through its narratives, languages, and visual representations of Nigerian social realities, Nollywood serves as a powerful medium for communicating Nigerian culture, traditions, identities, and values to international audiences. In doing so, the industry contributes to the reframing and rebranding of Nigeria's international image by offering alternative narratives that challenge persistent global stereotypes of corruption, insecurity, and instability. Beyond its cultural and symbolic influence, Nollywood also plays a significant role in Nigeria's creative economy by generating employment, stimulating cultural entrepreneurship, and attracting international partnerships. However, structural challenges including piracy, inadequate infrastructure, limited financing, and fragmented policy coordination continue to constrain its diplomatic potential. The paper therefore recommends the development of a comprehensive national cultural diplomacy strategy that integrates Nollywood into Nigeria's foreign policy framework, strengthens institutional collaboration, and promotes globally resonant storytelling. Such strategic alignment would enable Nollywood to function as a powerful platform for nation branding, economic diplomacy, and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy; Nollywood; Soft Power; Nation Branding; Nigeria's Global Image; Creative Economy; Public Diplomacy; Film Industry; Cultural Exchange; Global Cultural Influence



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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, has become one of the most prolific audiovisual industries in the world and a major contributor to the country's emerging soft power image (Trade.gov, 2025). Producing thousands

of films annually and employing millions of people across production, distribution, and related sectors, the industry has evolved from a modest low-budget video movement into a global cultural phenomenon that shapes

international perceptions of Nigeria and, more broadly, Africa (Faidi, 2024; Bailey, 2026; Oguamanam, 2020; Otuonye & Oshionebo, 2024). Nollywood films circulate widely across Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and North America, particularly among African diaspora communities, where they communicate Nigerian cultural values, social realities, and everyday experiences to global audiences (Endong, 2018; Ibagere, 2015). Through these narratives and cultural representations, Nollywood has become a powerful medium through which Nigeria projects its identity internationally and engages global publics.

In contemporary international relations, culture has increasingly become a strategic instrument through which states shape perceptions, build influence, and foster international partnerships. Cultural diplomacy reflects a shift from traditional diplomacy largely based on military strength and economic leverage toward softer approaches rooted in cultural attraction, storytelling, and public engagement. Within this evolving diplomatic framework, the global rise of Nollywood has attracted significant scholarly and policy attention due to its potential to serve as an effective tool of cultural diplomacy and soft power. Scholars argue that the growing international visibility of Nigerian films contributes to Nigeria's soft power by influencing cultural discourse and shaping foreign perceptions of the country (Ogunnubi & Idowu, 2022; Ojo, 2016).

Recent soft power assessments further reinforce this perspective. The Brand Finance soft power reporting discussed by Bailey (2026) indicates that Nigeria's creative industries particularly film and music—have played a visible role in improving the country's familiarity and influence scores globally. This suggests that cultural exports are increasingly important in shaping Nigeria's international reputation alongside traditional diplomatic engagement (Bailey, 2026). At the same time, broader scholarship on public diplomacy in developing countries emphasizes that sectors such as culture, education, sports, and science should be integrated into comprehensive international engagement strategies rather than treated as isolated domains (Welsh Government, 2020; Endong, 2026).

In response to these developments, the Nigerian government and policymakers have begun to acknowledge the strategic significance of the creative industries in both foreign policy and economic diplomacy (Salifu et al., 2023; Ogele, 2025). However, despite this growing recognition, the diplomatic potential of Nollywood remains only partially harnessed. Structural challenges including institutional fragmentation, inadequate infrastructure, piracy, limited global distribution frameworks, and weak policy coordination—continue to constrain the industry's ability to function fully as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy (Nwankwo, 2018; Odion, 2018).

Against this background, this review examines the intersection between Nollywood, cultural diplomacy, and

Nigeria's global influence. By synthesizing existing scholarship and policy perspectives, it explores how Nollywood can be more effectively integrated into Nigeria's diplomatic strategy in order to strengthen the country's international image, enhance its soft power capabilities, and deepen cultural relationships with other nations.

Conceptualising Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as an increasingly significant dimension of international relations, particularly in a global environment where states seek influence not only through military and economic power but also through cultural attraction and symbolic engagement (Figure 1). Broadly defined, cultural diplomacy refers to the exchange and dissemination of ideas, artistic expressions, cultural practices, values, and traditions across national boundaries with the aim of fostering mutual understanding, trust, and long-term cooperation among societies (Faidi, 2024; Ajayi, 2020). Unlike traditional diplomacy that relies primarily on political negotiations and strategic interests, cultural diplomacy operates through dialogue, cultural interaction, and shared experiences. It frequently involves a diverse set of actors beyond the state, including artists, filmmakers, cultural institutions, universities, civil society organizations, and creative industries that collectively project national identity to global audiences (Welsh Government, 2020; Ajayi, 2020; Munyangeyo, 2026).

In recent scholarship, cultural diplomacy has also been interpreted as a strategic instrument for reshaping global narratives and positioning nations within evolving geopolitical structures. Munyangeyo (2026) argues that cultural expression allows states, particularly those from the Global South, to challenge dominant geopolitical narratives and assert alternative identities in a multipolar world order. Through cultural representation, states are able to negotiate visibility and legitimacy in international discourse, thereby influencing how their societies, histories, and values are perceived globally. This perspective aligns with broader debates in African international relations scholarship which emphasize that culture can serve as a powerful medium for redefining Africa's global positionality beyond historical stereotypes and colonial narratives (Tella, 2025; Melchionno, 2023).

The theoretical foundation for understanding cultural diplomacy is closely linked to Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which refers to the ability of a country to influence the behaviour and preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or financial inducement. According to this framework, states derive soft power from three primary sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy (Endong, 2026). When a nation's culture resonates with global audiences and its policies are perceived as legitimate or morally credible, it gains the capacity to shape international outcomes indirectly. Soft power therefore represents a strategic alternative to hard power mechanisms such as military intervention or

Conceptualising Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Influencing Global Perceptions Through Culture

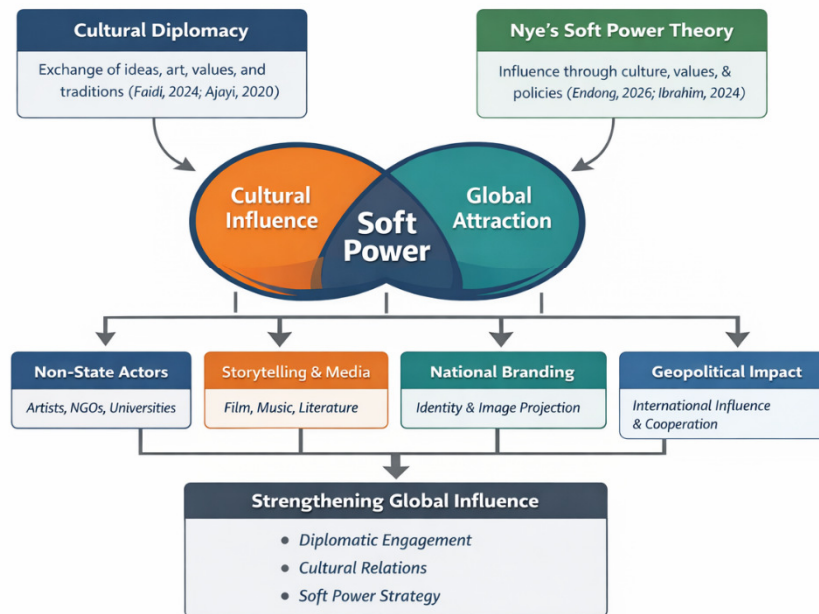


Figure 1: Conceptualising Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

economic sanctions. For developing countries, soft power provides an opportunity to exert influence in international affairs despite limitations in traditional power resources (Figure 1). Through cultural production, storytelling, media industries, and creative expressions, countries can project narratives that strengthen their global image and cultural appeal (Ibrahim, 2024; Ajayi, 2020). Oyebade et al. (2026) further note that soft power diplomacy has increasingly become a vital tool for states seeking to promote peace, security, and international cooperation, particularly within emerging geopolitical coalitions such as the BRICS+ framework. In this context, cultural diplomacy functions as a mechanism through which nations cultivate goodwill, build cross-cultural networks, and enhance diplomatic engagement beyond formal political channels.

Examples of institutionalized cultural diplomacy strategies can be found in several national contexts. The Welsh Government's Action Plan on International Relations through Public Diplomacy and Soft Power provides a structured model for mobilizing culture as a diplomatic resource. The policy integrates language, arts, music, festivals, sports, and educational institutions into a coordinated public diplomacy framework designed to strengthen Wales' international presence (Welsh Government, 2020). Through this approach, cultural assets such as the Welsh language (Cymraeg), national music traditions, sporting teams, and artistic institutions are strategically positioned as instruments for international

engagement, supported by clearly defined objectives, partnerships, and evaluation mechanisms. Such integrated models demonstrate how states can align cultural sectors with foreign policy and international branding initiatives. Similar strategies can be observed in other areas of diplomacy where economic and cultural engagement intersect. For instance, Faleye and Igechi (2026) illustrate how diplomatic strategies increasingly combine cultural narratives with economic partnerships in initiatives such as Chinese economic diplomacy in Nigeria. These evolving approaches highlight the growing importance of multi-sector diplomacy, where culture, economics, and politics operate within interconnected frameworks.

Within Nigeria's foreign policy landscape, the increasing complexity of global security challenges, shifting power alliances, and evolving diplomatic priorities has encouraged broader reflections on the role of non-traditional diplomatic instruments. Abidoye (2026a, 2026b) notes that Nigeria's external relations are being reshaped by contemporary global dynamics, including insecurity, transnational crime, and shifting geopolitical alignments, thereby creating opportunities for alternative diplomatic approaches that emphasize cultural engagement and international collaboration. In this context, cultural diplomacy becomes particularly relevant as it allows Nigeria to strengthen its international influence while complementing conventional diplomatic strategies.

Nollywood's Evolution, Structure and Global Reach

Historical Emergence and Industrial Structure



Figure 2: Nollywood's Evolution, Structure and Global Reach

Applying these theoretical perspectives to the Nigerian context suggests that cultural industries such as film, music, literature, and cuisine possess considerable potential as soft power assets. Previous studies have already highlighted the diplomatic significance of cultural expressions such as culinary traditions in projecting national identity internationally (Adesina, 2017). Similarly, creative sectors increasingly contribute to broader regional integration and socio-economic cooperation within Africa (Ambali, 2024). Within this wider cultural ecosystem, Nollywood occupies a particularly strategic position due to its extensive global reach and its capacity to communicate Nigerian narratives to diverse audiences. Recent scholarship also emphasizes the role of storytelling and heritage representation within Nollywood as mechanisms through which cultural memory and identity are constructed and transmitted across borders (Offeyi, 2026). By portraying social realities, moral values, historical experiences, and cultural practices, Nollywood films contribute not only to entertainment but also to the international circulation of Nigerian cultural narratives. Consequently, the industry represents a significant cultural diplomacy asset capable of shaping perceptions of Nigeria in the global cultural landscape. Taken together, these

conceptual and theoretical perspectives demonstrate that cultural diplomacy and soft power are mutually reinforcing frameworks through which states can enhance their global influence. For Nigeria, integrating Nollywood into a structured cultural diplomacy strategy could strengthen the country's international image, support foreign policy objectives, and deepen cultural relationships with global audiences. Such an approach would require coordinated policies that align film industry development with broader diplomatic, cultural, and international branding initiatives.

Nollywood's Evolution, Structure and Global Reach

Historical Emergence and Industrial Structure

The Nigerian film industry, widely known as Nollywood, emerged in the early 1990s through a distinctive grassroots filmmaking movement that relied heavily on low-budget, direct-to-video productions (Figure 2). One of the most frequently cited milestones in this development is the release of *Living in Bondage* in 1992, a film often regarded as the symbolic starting point of the contemporary Nollywood era (Azeez, 2019; Ekperuoh et

al., 2021). Produced with minimal financial resources but compelling storytelling, the film demonstrated the commercial viability of locally produced video films and inspired a wave of independent productions across Nigeria. Early Nollywood films were typically distributed through informal market networks, video rental shops, and street vendors, allowing them to quickly reach audiences within Nigeria and across other African countries (Shaka, 2011; Miller, 2012). These films resonated strongly with viewers because they portrayed familiar social realities such as family relationships, religious beliefs, moral dilemmas, and the rapid social transformations occurring within Nigerian society (Onyekakeyah, 2009; Endong, 2026).

From an industrial perspective, Nollywood developed a production model that is markedly different from the highly capital-intensive structures of Hollywood and Bollywood. The industry is characterized by short production cycles, relatively low budgets, entrepreneurial financing structures, and rapid distribution networks, enabling filmmakers to produce large volumes of content within limited timeframes (Oguamanam, 2018; Faidi, 2024). This flexible and adaptive production system allowed Nollywood to become one of the most prolific film industries in the world in terms of output (Onyekakeyah, 2009; Azeez, 2019). Over time, however, the industry has undergone gradual transformation as digital technologies, improved cinematographic techniques, and expanding global markets have encouraged greater professionalization. The emergence of organized production companies, filmmakers' guilds, and industry associations has contributed to improving production standards and institutional coordination, although elements of informality and fragmentation remain significant features of the industry (Madichie et al., 2019; Humanus Discourse, 2024; Okwuowulu).

Scholars have also highlighted the innovative entrepreneurial culture that underpins Nollywood's development. Oguamanam (2020) describes the Nollywood phenomenon as a model of technological opportunism and creative entrepreneurship, where filmmakers creatively utilize available resources and emerging technologies to produce culturally relevant content. This entrepreneurial adaptability has enabled the industry to sustain rapid growth despite challenges such as piracy, weak intellectual property protection, and limited access to formal financing (Arewa, 2012; Akudinobi, 2015). Consequently, Nollywood has evolved into an important example of how cultural industries in developing economies can generate significant creative output and global cultural influence.

Economic Significance and the Creative Economy

Beyond its cultural importance, Nollywood has become a significant component of Nigeria's creative or "orange"

economy, contributing to employment generation, economic diversification, and international cultural trade. According to Trade.gov (2025), the film industry plays a notable role in Nigeria's gross domestic product and supports millions of jobs across various segments including production, distribution, marketing, cinematography, costume design, and post-production services. These downstream activities have helped position Nollywood as a central pillar within Nigeria's broader creative economy. Recent economic projections further emphasize the growing financial significance of the creative sector. Bailey (2026) reports that Nigeria's combined creative industries particularly film and music are expected to generate approximately \$14.8 billion in revenue by 2025, underscoring their increasing contribution to national economic development. The expanding global demand for Nigerian entertainment content has also created new opportunities for export revenues and international partnerships. Scholars therefore argue that Nollywood's economic expansion intersects closely with economic diplomacy, as the global success of the industry enhances Nigeria's reputation as a hub for creativity, innovation, and cultural entrepreneurship (Faidi, 2024; Ajayi, 2020; Babalola, 2025).

From a diplomatic standpoint, the economic vitality of Nollywood strengthens Nigeria's international credibility in the creative industries and encourages foreign investment, co-production agreements, and cultural exchange initiatives. Similar to how other countries deploy cultural sectors such as film festivals, music industries, and artistic institutions for international branding, Nigeria can strategically utilize Nollywood's economic narrative—highlighting creativity, employment, and innovation—to enhance its global image (Welsh Government, 2020). In this regard, the intersection between cultural production and economic diplomacy reinforces Nollywood's broader strategic significance within Nigeria's international engagement.

Transnational Circulation and Audience Reach

One of the most distinctive features of Nollywood is its extensive **transnational circulation** and its ability to reach audiences far beyond Nigeria's borders. From its early years, the industry developed alternative distribution networks that facilitated the rapid movement of Nigerian films across Africa and the global diaspora. Nollywood films have gained widespread popularity in Anglophone and Francophone African countries, as well as in Caribbean nations, Europe, and North America where African diaspora communities form a significant audience base (Krings & Okome, 2013; Ajayi, 2020). Initially distributed through VHS tapes and DVDs sold in informal markets, Nollywood content has increasingly migrated to digital platforms, satellite television, and online streaming

services. Contemporary distribution channels now include global platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and various African streaming services that specialize in African film and television content (Madichie et al., 2019; Faidi, 2024). These digital transformations have significantly expanded Nollywood's global visibility and audience reach.

Scholars note that this cross-border circulation has positioned Nollywood as an influential non-state actor in international cultural communication. Through storytelling, cultural representation, and entertainment narratives, Nollywood facilitates people-to-people interactions that complement formal diplomatic channels such as embassies and state-led cultural exchanges (Miller, 2012; Ekperuoh et al., 2021). Comparative studies of cinematic influence suggest that Nollywood plays a role in West and Central Africa similar to the cultural dominance of Hollywood in Europe and Bollywood within South Asia and its diaspora communities (Hediger, 2025; Olayinka, 2025). Such levels of transnational cultural influence underscore Nollywood's potential as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy.

Nollywood as an Instrument of Cultural Diplomacy

Projecting Nigerian Culture, Identities and Values

A growing body of scholarship highlights the role of Nollywood in projecting Nigerian cultural identities, traditions, and social values to global audiences. Through its narratives and visual representations, the industry communicates key aspects of Nigerian society including extended family structures, communal solidarity, religious practices, traditional ceremonies, indigenous cuisines, clothing styles, and local languages (Ajayi, 2020; Ekperuoh et al., 2021). These portrayals provide international audiences with accessible insights into everyday Nigerian life and contribute to a deeper cultural understanding of the country (Onyekakeyah, 2009; Endong, 2026).

Researchers further argue that the Nigerian entertainment industry functions as an informal platform for cultural diplomacy, where narratives of resilience, creativity, and social transformation shape international perceptions of the country (Ekperuoh et al., 2021). Afolabi et al. (2025) similarly describe Nollywood as both a cultural mirror and a global megaphone that reflects Nigerian social realities while simultaneously amplifying national aspirations to global audiences. By presenting stories that resonate emotionally with viewers across cultural boundaries, Nollywood films have the potential to foster empathy, curiosity, and admiration for Nigerian culture.

Another significant aspect of Nollywood's cultural diplomacy lies in its **linguistic diversity**. Films are produced in multiple languages including English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other indigenous

languages. This multilingual approach allows the industry to preserve and promote Nigeria's linguistic heritage while also making the films accessible to international audiences through subtitles and dubbing (Humanus Discourse, 2024; Olayinka, 2025). In this respect, Nollywood demonstrates how language diversity can function as a soft power resource. Similar to the Welsh Government's strategic use of the Welsh language (Cymraeg) as a cultural diplomacy tool, Nigeria's multilingual film production highlights the country's cultural richness and strengthens its visibility in the global cultural landscape (Welsh Government, 2020). Taken together, Nollywood's historical development, industrial structure, economic significance, and global circulation illustrate its transformation from a locally driven video-film movement into a globally recognized cultural industry. These characteristics provide a strong foundation for understanding the industry's potential role as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy and international cultural influence.

Reframing and Rebranding Nigeria's International Image

Nigeria's international image has historically been shaped by persistent narratives of corruption, fraud, insecurity, and political instability (Figure 3). These representations have frequently been amplified within global media discourses, thereby contributing to a stereotypical and often reductionist portrayal of the country in international public opinion (Aghedo, 2013; Adebola, Talabi, & Lamidi, 2012). Such perceptions have posed significant challenges for Nigeria's diplomatic standing, foreign investment prospects, and global cultural influence. As Aghedo (2013) argues, nation branding within fragile states such as Nigeria requires deliberate communication strategies capable of countering entrenched negative stereotypes while promoting a more balanced representation of national identity. Similarly, Adebola et al. (2012) emphasize that advertising, public relations, and cultural communication initiatives are critical tools for correcting distorted international perceptions and projecting a coherent national image.

Within this context, the discourse on rebranding Nigeria has evolved beyond conventional public relations campaigns to include broader cultural, political, and social interventions. Odum (2015) critically evaluates Nigeria's official rebranding initiatives and notes that although several government-led branding projects sought to reshape Nigeria's global image, their impact remained limited due to inconsistencies between promotional narratives and domestic realities. This observation aligns with Ogunnubi and Opeyemi's (2020) argument that successful nation branding must be rooted in authentic national identity and active citizen participation rather than purely symbolic state-driven campaigns.

Consequently, scholars have increasingly emphasized the role of cultural production and narrative ownership in the



Figure 3: Reframing and Rebranding Nigeria's International Image

process of image reconstruction. Adegaju (2017) highlights that nation branding campaigns in Nigeria often attempt to resist negative stereotypes by encouraging

Nigerians to “tell their own story.” This semiotic resistance underscores the importance of narrative control in global representation, where national identity is communicated

not only through official policy but also through cultural texts, media discourse, and everyday social interactions. In a similar vein, Fu and Chigbu (2025) demonstrate how discourse framing within Nigerian political communication influences the international perception of national challenges such as insecurity, further illustrating the role of language and representation in shaping global narratives about the country.

Against this backdrop, Nollywood has emerged as one of the most influential cultural platforms for reframing Nigeria's global image (Figure 3). Through cinematic storytelling, the industry presents multidimensional portrayals of Nigerian society that extend beyond dominant media narratives of crisis and dysfunction. Nigerian films frequently depict themes of family life, entrepreneurship, resilience, humour, spirituality, and social transformation, thereby offering more nuanced and humanized representations of Nigerian realities. This cultural storytelling aligns with the broader theoretical argument that cultural industries function as instruments of soft power capable of influencing international perceptions of a nation (Awosusi & Olagbaju, 2021).

The ability of cultural narratives to reshape global perceptions has been widely recognized within the literature on nation branding and cultural diplomacy. Awosusi and Olagbaju (2021) argue that education, culture, and diaspora engagement constitute important soft power resources through which Nigeria can reconstruct its international image. Similarly, Jemiluyi and Falokun (2026) demonstrate how Nigerian popular media reconfigures representations of marginality and poverty by transforming them into performative narratives of resilience and identity. Such representations challenge dominant external portrayals of Nigeria while simultaneously generating alternative visual and cultural discourses.

Furthermore, the rebranding of national identity is closely linked to broader global discursive dynamics. Dorvlo (2025) notes that international perceptions of African states are often shaped by geopolitical narratives and media framing that may reinforce or destabilize regional reputations. In this regard, Nigeria's efforts to reframe its global image must also be understood within the wider contestation over how African societies are represented within global discourse. Similarly, Ononiwu, Sunday, and Oyeleye (2025) illustrate how social media movements such as #EndSARS contribute to the reconstruction of Nigerian identity through digital activism and visual communication, thereby demonstrating that nation branding in the contemporary era increasingly occurs through decentralized and participatory communication spaces.

Another significant dimension of Nigeria's image reconstruction lies in the activities of the Nigerian diaspora. Diaspora communities often serve as informal cultural ambassadors who disseminate Nigerian cultural products, including films, music, fashion, and cuisine, within host

societies. Through everyday cultural exchanges, diaspora Nigerians contribute to reshaping global perceptions by presenting alternative narratives of Nigerian creativity, innovation, and cultural richness. These dynamics echo broader frameworks of citizen-driven diplomacy, where ordinary individuals participate in the international representation of their home countries (Amponsah, 2026). Additionally, the process of reframing national identity requires a critical engagement with historical and bureaucratic structures that shape governance and institutional narratives. Cohen (2019) notes that contemporary Nigerian bureaucratic practices often reflect historical continuities that influence both domestic governance and international perceptions of the state. Addressing these structural factors is therefore essential for ensuring that nation branding initiatives are supported by substantive institutional reforms.

Economic Attraction and Partnership Building

The global expansion of Nollywood has increasingly positioned Nigeria's creative industry as a catalyst for economic attraction and international partnership building. As one of the most visible expressions of Nigeria's cultural production, Nollywood functions not only as an entertainment industry but also as an economic driver capable of stimulating trade, tourism, and cross-border creative collaborations (Figure 4). Within the framework of the creative economy, cultural industries such as film generate both symbolic and material value by transforming cultural capital into measurable economic opportunities (Adeola, 2026; Felix, 2026).

The international popularity of Nigerian films has created widespread global interest in associated cultural sectors including fashion, music, cuisine, and tourism. This phenomenon demonstrates how cultural exports can influence consumption patterns and stimulate demand for related goods and services originating from Nigeria (Inyang & Anieke, n.d.; Eluwole, 2026). As Nollywood narratives circulate globally through cinemas, television networks, and digital platforms, they simultaneously promote Nigerian lifestyles and cultural aesthetics, thereby expanding the country's cultural market footprint and encouraging foreign engagement with Nigeria's broader creative ecosystem (Madichie, Ajakaiye, & Ratten, 2019; Evans & Adeola, 2026).

Beyond cultural visibility, Nollywood also contributes significantly to international economic collaboration. The growth of the industry has encouraged co-production agreements, distribution partnerships, and talent exchange programmes between Nigerian filmmakers and global production entities (Adeosun & Maiyaki, 2026). Such collaborations are increasingly facilitated by global streaming platforms and digital distribution systems, which have expanded the accessibility and profitability of African film industries (Evans & Adeola, 2026). These partnerships strengthen Nigeria's integration into the

Economic Attraction and Partnership Building through Nollywood's Soft Power

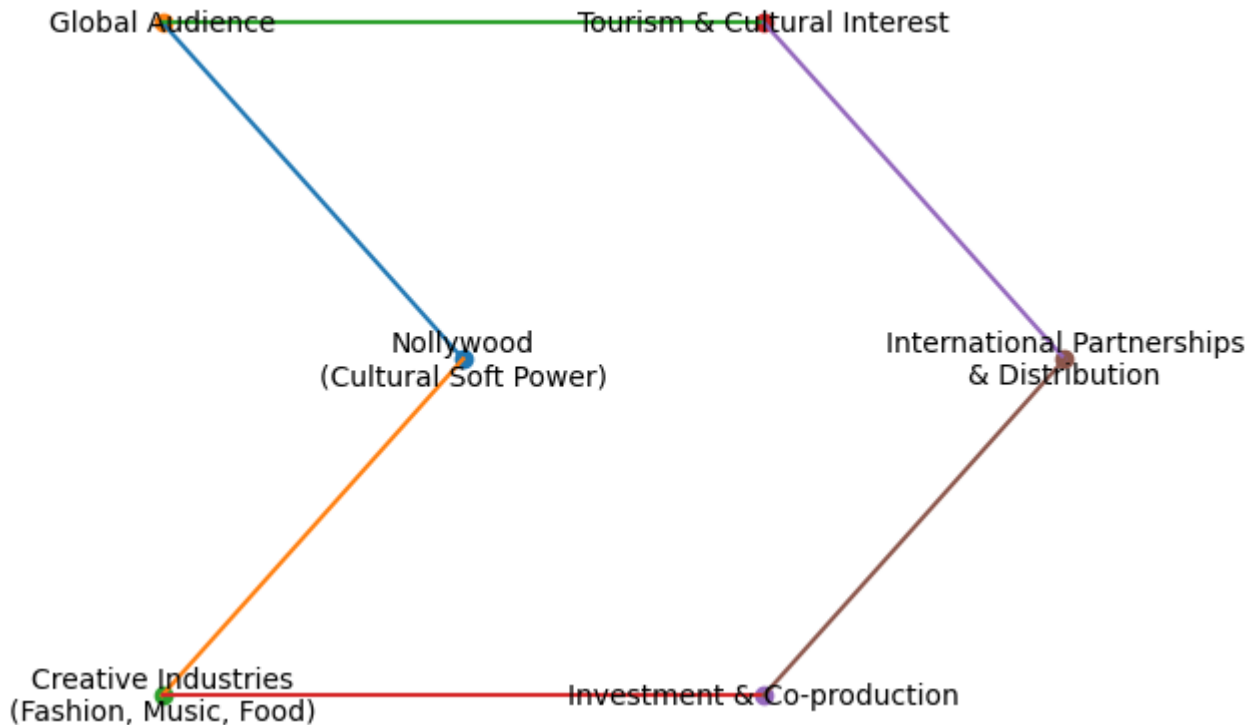


Figure 4: Economic attraction and partnership building through Nollywood's Spft Power.

global creative economy while simultaneously enhancing the industry's production capacity and technological development.

Film festivals and international exhibitions further reinforce these economic and diplomatic linkages. Platforms such as international film festivals and industry workshops provide opportunities for Nigerian filmmakers to showcase their productions, attract investors, and establish collaborative networks with international producers and distributors (Shaka & Harcourt, 2022). These interactions not only elevate the global status of Nollywood but also facilitate knowledge transfer, funding opportunities, and cross-cultural storytelling partnerships. Furthermore, the economic influence of Nollywood extends beyond Nigeria's borders, particularly within the African continent. The widespread consumption of Nigerian films in countries such as South Africa illustrates the industry's growing regional market influence and its capacity to stimulate economic exchanges across African creative sectors (Ekene & Njoku, 2026). Similar creative economy frameworks across Africa emphasize the importance of film and performing arts as strategic sectors capable of fostering innovation ecosystems, employment generation, and cultural entrepreneurship (Abubakar, 2025; Solomon et al., 2026).

However, the sustainability of these economic benefits depends heavily on institutional frameworks such as intellectual property protection, investment policies, and supportive creative industry infrastructures. Strengthening copyright enforcement and regulatory structures remains essential for protecting the value generated by Nollywood productions and ensuring fair distribution of economic returns across the industry (Kouletakis, Lawal-Arowolo, & Itanyi, 2023). Moreover, aligning cultural production with broader sustainable development strategies can further enhance the role of creative industries in achieving national economic diversification and poverty reduction goals (Chukwudi & Isaac, 2026; Felix, 2026).

In essence, Nollywood illustrates how cultural industries can function as instruments of economic diplomacy. By attracting international audiences, stimulating tourism and cultural consumption, and fostering global creative partnerships, the Nigerian film industry demonstrates the capacity of soft power resources to generate tangible economic outcomes. As the industry continues to evolve within an increasingly digital and globalized media landscape, its ability to attract investment, stimulate cultural exchange, and promote Nigeria's creative economy will remain central to the country's broader development trajectory (Adeola, 2026; Evans & Adeola,

2026).

Comparative Lessons from Wales and Other Cinematic Soft Power Models

The Welsh Government plan of public diplomacy is a reflection of how a state can integrate arts, sport, language and education in a consistent external relations policy (Welsh Government, 2020). The country enhances film, television, digital industries, music, as well as publishing at the grassroots and international level through Creative Wales with clear objectives of global visibility, economic growth, and projecting values (Welsh Government, 2020). Cultural presence is yet another example of how Wales can be linked to mega-events (e.g., Expo, Rugby World Cup Tours), which leads to the combination of culture and sport in order to optimise branding and diplomatic effects (Welsh Government, 2020).

Cinematic soft power comparative research shows that there are similarities in the cinematic soft power in Bollywood and Korean filmmaking. According to Olayinka (2025), state policies that have enabled co-productions, provided tax incentives and combined film exports and tourism and language promotion have been in favor of both industries. Korean Wave (Hallyu) is one such case, where films, dramas, and K-pop are used in a coordinated campaign to raise the culture of South Korea and impact the choice of consumers in the global market (Olayinka, 2025).

These are some of the lessons that Nigeria can learn from:

1. The cultural industries enjoy the benefits of diplomacy when institutionalized through policy strategies instead of being left to the market forces entirely (Welsh Government, 2020; Ajayi, 2020).
2. The promotion of the film can be tied to tourism, education, and trade to increase returns on the soft power (Faidi, 2024; Olayinka, 2025).
3. It is essential to collaborate with foreign cultural organizations and festivals to be seen and heard (Endong, 2026; Ajayi, 2020).

Using such models, Nigeria can formulate a Nollywood-driven cultural diplomacy approach, which will be context sensitive and globally knowledgeable.

Policy Strategies for Harnessing Nollywood in Cultural Diplomacy

Institutional and Policy Frameworks

Effective policy strategies are essential for fully harnessing Nollywood's potential as an instrument of cultural diplomacy. A recurring theme in existing scholarship is that the diplomatic capacity of Nollywood remains underutilized largely due to fragmented governance structures and the absence of a comprehensive policy framework that integrates the creative industry into Nigeria's broader

foreign policy strategy (Humanus Discourse, 2024; Ibrahim, 2024). Although institutional bodies such as the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) and the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) exist to regulate and promote the film industry, their activities are often insufficiently coordinated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Nigeria's diplomatic missions abroad. This lack of institutional synergy limits the ability of Nollywood to function effectively as a strategic tool for cultural diplomacy and international engagement (Ekperuoh et al., 2021). Drawing inspiration from structured public diplomacy models such as the Welsh Government's Action Plan on International Relations through Public Diplomacy and Soft Power, Nigeria could develop a comprehensive National Cultural Diplomacy Strategy that explicitly recognizes Nollywood as a key soft power asset. Such a strategy would establish clear roles and responsibilities for relevant ministries, cultural institutions, and diplomatic missions, ensuring that the promotion of Nigerian culture through film becomes an integral component of the country's international relations agenda (Welsh Government, 2020). Within this framework, a dedicated cultural diplomacy unit could be created and staffed by professionals from cultural institutions, information agencies, and the foreign affairs sector to coordinate film-related diplomatic initiatives and international cultural programming.

In addition, Nollywood could be systematically integrated into bilateral and multilateral cultural cooperation agreements, including co-production treaties and memoranda of understanding with strategic partners across Africa, Europe, and Asia. Such agreements would facilitate knowledge exchange, access to international funding, and collaborative film productions that enhance global visibility for Nigerian cinema (Ajayi, 2020; Faidi, 2024). Furthermore, the establishment of special funding schemes, tax incentives, and financial support mechanisms for films with strong international appeal or cultural diplomacy value could encourage the production of content that resonates with global audiences while showcasing Nigeria's cultural identity (Humanus Discourse, 2024). Collectively, these institutional and policy measures would provide the structural support necessary to transform Nollywood from a largely market-driven cultural phenomenon into a deliberate and coordinated instrument of Nigeria's cultural diplomacy and soft power strategy.

Content, Narratives and Storytelling

The effectiveness of Nollywood as a soft power resource largely depends on the nature of its content, narratives, and storytelling. At the core of Nollywood's cultural influence is its ability to produce stories that reflect the realities, aspirations, and cultural experiences of Nigerian society. Earlier scholarly critiques of Nollywood at the beginning of the twenty-first century often emphasized the dominance of themes such as occultism, crime, ritual

practices, and sensational melodrama, raising concerns that such portrayals might reinforce negative stereotypes about Nigeria and African societies more broadly (Endong, 2026; Nwankwo, 2012). However, more recent developments within the industry indicate a gradual diversification of themes and narratives. Contemporary Nollywood productions increasingly explore a broader range of social, economic, and political issues including entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, governance reforms, historical experiences, migration, and diaspora identities, thereby presenting more nuanced and multifaceted representations of Nigerian society (Bailey, 2026; Faidi, 2024).

Within this evolving narrative landscape, policy interventions need not impose strict control over artistic expression but can instead create supportive frameworks that encourage storytelling aligned with broader national values and foreign policy aspirations. For instance, films that highlight Nigeria's contributions to regional peacekeeping, African unity, climate change adaptation, technological innovation, and social development can subtly reinforce positive diplomatic messages while maintaining creative independence and avoiding overt propaganda (Afolabi et al., 2025; Ajayi, 2020). Similarly, promoting historical and biographical films that depict significant individuals, national movements, and key events in Nigeria's history can strengthen national consciousness while simultaneously educating international audiences about Nigeria's leadership roles and historical contributions within Africa and the global community (Nwankwo, 2012).

Another important dimension involves encouraging cross-cultural storytelling collaborations in which narratives incorporate characters, locations, or themes connected to partner countries. Such collaborative productions can enhance cultural visibility, foster empathy across societies, and strengthen international relationships through shared storytelling experiences. Comparable initiatives have been implemented in other cultural diplomacy frameworks, such as Wales' cultural collaborations under its Priority Regional Relationships and Networks Action Plan (Welsh Government, 2020). In addition, capacity-building programmes in scriptwriting, media literacy, and intercultural communication implemented in partnership with international film schools, cultural institutes, and creative training centres could further strengthen Nollywood's ability to produce globally resonant stories while maintaining distinctively Nigerian cultural perspectives (Olayinka, 2025; Afolabi et al., 2025). Through such initiatives, Nollywood can continue to evolve as a powerful storytelling platform capable of shaping international perceptions and reinforcing Nigeria's cultural diplomacy objectives.

Diplomatic Platforms and Programming

Nollywood can be strategically integrated into Nigeria's

diplomatic platforms abroad as part of a broader cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy strategy. When incorporated into embassy programming, cultural seasons, and thematic diplomatic events, film and other forms of cultural communication can serve as effective tools for engaging foreign publics and promoting Nigeria's cultural identity internationally. Ajayi (2020) argues that cultural communication, particularly through film, has the capacity to function as an important instrument of public diplomacy by fostering dialogue, enhancing mutual understanding, and creating positive cultural impressions among international audiences. Drawing from successful international models such as the Welsh cultural season in Germany in 2021 and various British Council cultural diplomacy initiatives, Nigerian diplomatic missions could adopt similar approaches by organizing thematic film weeks, retrospectives, and public discussions during national celebrations, international cultural events, and multilateral gatherings (Welsh Government, 2020).

In practical terms, several initiatives can be developed to operationalize Nollywood's diplomatic potential. Nigerian embassies, consulates, and cultural centres could host regular Nigerian film festivals on a periodic basis, where films are screened alongside panel discussions and academic dialogues involving filmmakers, scholars, and cultural practitioners. Such platforms would not only showcase Nigerian cinematic creativity but also provide opportunities to discuss broader issues related to Nigerian society, history, and development (Ajayi, 2020). Additionally, strategic collaborations with major international film festivals such as Cannes, Toronto, FESPACO, and Busan could facilitate Nollywood exhibitions, industry forums, and networking opportunities that expand the global visibility of Nigerian cinema while encouraging partnerships between Nigerian filmmakers and international producers and distributors (Faidi, 2024; Endong, 2026).

Furthermore, prominent Nollywood actors and directors could be appointed as cultural or goodwill ambassadors in areas such as tourism promotion, education advocacy, and public health campaigns. Given their extensive fan base and social influence, these cultural figures can effectively communicate positive messages about Nigeria and promote national initiatives to international audiences (Afolabi et al., 2025). Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate how cultural content, when delivered through accessible and engaging platforms, can open diplomatic channels, reshape public perceptions, and facilitate broader political and economic engagement between Nigeria and the international community (Welsh Government, 2020; Ajayi, 2020).

Challenges and Constraints

Nollywood has a potential but it is impeded by a few constraints that restrict its ability as an effective tool of cultural diplomacy. Piracy is a significant issue, as it is

undermining incomes, deterring investment, as well as professionalization of the industry (Humanus Discourse, 2024; Trade.gov, 2025). Quality and timely production is also hindered by infrastructural issues, intermittent electricity, lack of studio facilities, and networks, which are uneven (Bailey, 2026; Ekperuoh et al., 2021). Reputationally, critics have noted that there are still elements of corruption, ritualism and violence in certain Nollywood films, which, when watched blindly by foreign viewers, may reinforce some of the negative stereotypes (Endong, 2026; Nwankwo, 2012). Olayinka (2025) cautions that in case of media literacy and contextual ignorance, audiences can assume that fictional accounts reflect reality in those areas where there is little background information about Nigeria.

On an institutional level, the poor communication between the cultural, information, and foreign affairs agencies implies that most Nollywood hits are not strategically exploited during the diplomatic outreach of Nigeria (Ibrahim, 2024). Another delicate question is the need to make sure that the participation of states does not suppress artistic freedom and transform film-makers into perceived propagandists, which would lower the levels of domestic legitimacy and foreign credibility (Ajayi, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Nollywood has grown into a high-budget home-video sensation, then into a film industry globally recognised, whose role in forming the development of the image of Nigeria in the foreign context is becoming more significant (Faidi, 2024; Endong, 2026). It can present the culture, values and realities of Nigerians, through its rich narrations, multi linguistic forms, and extensive reach, to challenge the limited representations of Nigerians to outsiders and reinforce emotional connections with the foreign and diaspora viewers (Onyekakeyah, 2009; Nwankwo, 2012). However, the entire diplomatic capabilities of Nollywood are still not used to the maximum because of institutional, infrastructural, and content-based problems (Humanus Discourse, 2024; Ibrahim, 2024). Nigeria can turn Nollywood into a deliberate tool of cultural diplomacy rather than an almost organic source of soft power by adopting a consistent cultural diplomacy approach, improving the inter-agency coordination system, promoting strategically significant content, and studying other best practices like Wales, India or South Korea (Welsh Government, 2020; Olayinka, 2025). That way, the nation will be able to enhance its international power, enhance its world perception, and prevent cultural relationships that will be more complementary to classical manifestations of statecraft.

Recommendations

In order to surmount these obstacles and make Nollywood achieve its maximum cultural diplomacy, some steps can

be suggested:

Create a National Cultural Diplomacy Strategy

Nigeria needs to develop a clear plan, that Nollywood, music, literature, and visual arts are the main pillars of soft power, with clear goals, duties and assessment systems, based upon lessons learned with more structured models such as Wales (Welsh Government, 2020; Ajayi, 2020).

Enhance Institutions and Inter-agencies Coordination

More should be done to increase the cooperation between the Nigerian Film Corporation, NFVCB, Ministry of Information and Culture, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate content creation, popularization, and diplomatic application (Ekperuoh et al., 2021; Ibrahim, 2024).

Solve the Problem of Piracy and the Lack of Infrastructure

Better intellectual property law enforcement, digital rights, and studio and cinemas would make the industry more sustainable and high-quality, thus making Nollywood more appealing as a soft power product (Humanus Discourse, 2024; Trade.gov, 2025).

Support that has a Diplomatic Value but Maintains the Freedom of Creativity

The funding strategies, tax breaks, and support of the festival should focus on films that thoughtfully explore the values of Nigeria, development issues, and foreign policy priorities, but should not dictate the ideological content (Afolabi et al., 2025; Faidi, 2024).

Develop Competence in International Narration and Intercultural Communication

Skills, including framing narratives, analyzing audiences and media literacy, can be enhanced through training programmes in partnership with local universities and other international partners and strengthens the sophistication of Nollywood in terms of international outreach (Olayinka, 2025; Ajayi, 2020).

Monitoring and Evaluation should be institutionalized

Audience surveys, social media analytics, and Global Soft Power Index, among others, allow tracking the effects Nollywood has on perceptions and then implement adjustments to countermeasures based on the data (Bailey, 2026; Ibrahim, 2024).

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